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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TEGUCIGALPA 001137

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/18/2018
TAGS: [MOPS](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [EAIR](#) [HO](#)
SUBJECT: GOVERNMENT OF HONDURAS PICKS LEAST OBTRUSIVE
OPTION IN BUILDING A CIVILIAN TERMINAL AT SOTO CANO

REF: A. TEGUCIGALPA 637
[1](#)B. TEGUCIGALPA 583
[1](#)C. TEGUCIGALPA 541
[1](#)D. TEGUCIGALPA 527
[1](#)E. TEGUCIGALPA 519
[1](#)F. TEGUCIGALPA 517

Classified By: Ambassador Hugo Llorens, Reasons 1.4 (b & d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. The Government of Honduras announced December 17 that it had signed a contract to build a small civilian terminal at the northwest end of the runway, away from the area used by U.S. and Honduran forces. The Embassy worked behind the scenes to encourage a plan that did not interfere with U.S. or Honduran military options, while assuring the GOH that it would support President Manuel "Mel" Zelaya's desire to begin building a civilian terminal to replace Tegucigalpa's current airport, which has a difficult approach, steep visual pattern, and relatively short runway, which suffered a fatal airline crash on May 30. While we believe construction will take place, there are a number of factors that likely will keep Soto Cano from becoming Tegucigalpa's new airport, at least in the short term. The GOH decision to build the terminal on the northwest side of the terminal ensures that the U.S. military and humanitarian operations will not be significantly hampered. We have informed GOH contacts of the CAFTA obligation to award public contracts by open competitive bid. End summary.

[1](#)2. (U) Press reported December 17 that the GOH had come to terms with airport concessionaire Inter-Airports on constructing a civilian passenger terminal at the U.S.-Honduran Soto Cano Air Base near Comayagua. Our sources indicate the approved plan will involve building a terminal on the northwest side of the existing airstrip, which will not require moving any significant infrastructure or interfere with ongoing U.S. or Honduran military operations. The 12 million USD contract includes building an access road and a small terminal.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Zelaya had been pushing since the May 30 fatal crash of a Taca airliner at Tegucigalpa's Toncontin airport (Ref F) to move the city's airport to Soto Cano, initially closing Toncontin for 60 days after the crash (Refs A to D). Subsequently, he put enormous pressure on Inter-Airports, the

Honduran military, and other Honduran government agencies to create a civilian airport at Soto Cano. Initially demanding operations within 90 days, he eventually settled on a one-year plan. Toncontin, while conveniently located, is notorious for its difficult approach, and relatively short runway. Most experts believe the airport should be moved, but most Tegucigalpa political leaders and residents believe that Soto Cano is too far (approximately 60 kilometers) from the city and would prefer a new airport closer in. (Construction of a new four-lane highway, due to be completed in three years, which runs by the airport, may eventually change this view.)

¶4. (C) The Embassy has worked behind the scenes to encourage a solution that met President Zelaya's strong desire to start construction on a terminal without interfering with U.S. or Honduran military operations, particularly JTF-B's military and humanitarian work. The Embassy repeatedly assured GOH contacts, through DATT, MilGroup, POL, and ECON offices, that this was a Honduran sovereign decision whether or not to build the terminal and that we would support their efforts. While there were rumors, spurred by President Zelaya's decision to join ALBA, that building a civilian terminal might be meant as a way to force the U.S. military out of the base, President Zelaya privately assured the Ambassador and publicly stated that he wanted U.S. military presence to remain. The Embassy also resisted efforts by Inter-Airports to get us to reject a plan that would have required moving USG fuel tanks at the base. Instead, the Embassy delivered a dipnote to the GOH pledging our continued support, but

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pointing out that this design would require moving underground fuel tanks, which would cost at least USD 30 million and take at least two years.

¶5. (C) While construction is likely to begin in the next few months, it is very unlikely Tegucigalpa's airport operations will be transferred to Soto Cano any time soon. There is strong political opposition in Tegucigalpa to transferring the city's airport to a distant location. A new president will takeover from Zelaya in January 2010, it is not clear if either of the two candidates will support the move. Finally, international certification of a new civilian airport would take significant time as well as all the changes required to turn a military airport into a commercial passenger airport.

¶6. (SBU) We have conveyed to Honduran government officials the CAFTA obligation to award public contracts by open competitive bid. However, the GOH position is that while they agree in principle, in the aftermath of the fatal accident at Tegucigalpa's Toncontin Airport, the GOH had declared an emergency and is seeking to move this project forward on an expeditious basis in the year left of the Zelaya Administration. The GOH also believes that it has a contractual obligation to Inter-Airport to manage and build international airport operations in the country. In the final analysis, the GOH argues that their obligation to save lives and legal obligations to Inter-Airport, outweighs recognized obligations under both CAFTA and Honduras's own public contracting law.

¶7. (C) Comment: The GOH decision to build the terminal on the northwest side of the site ensures that U.S. military and humanitarian operations will not be significantly hampered. Despite the construction, we do not believe there will be international civilian flights out of Soto Cano in the near future. Whether or not Soto Cano eventually replaces Toncontin as Tegucigalpa's airport will be decided by the next GOH administration.

LLORENS